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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

National Guard's top Soldiers awarded honors

RAPID CITY, S.D. – The South Dakota Army National Guard named Sgt. Shannon Crane of Summerset as the Noncommissioned Officer of the Year and Pfc. Kevin King, Rapid City, as the Soldier of the Year for 2007. Each award is the top honor for both the noncommissioned officer and enlisted corps within the state's Army National Guard.

"These two individuals simply astounded the review board," said State Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bekaert. "Every year, I am amazed at the quality of Soldiers within our organization."

Experience and confidence were the characteristics that separated these two from the other top competitors, said Bekaert.

"I am very proud of the NCOs and Soldiers that made it to the state boards," said Bekaert, acting president of the state board selection committee. "To make it this far is quite an accomplishment."

Bekaert said that the competitors had already made it through three levels of competition beginning at the company, to battalion and the major command level boards. The final state board was conducted on Jan. 26, at the Regional Training Institute in Sioux Falls. The five Soldiers that competed for the top award represented the best out of the more than 3,300 Soldiers within the South Dakota Army National Guard.

Crane works full-time as personnel systems training NCO for Joint Force Headquarters in Rapid City.

"I was shocked when they called my name," said Crane. "The other NCOs I was competing against were very professional and looked sharp in their uniforms."

Crane said that overall the experience of competing at the state level was very rewarding and that the review board members made a very stressful experience less intimidating.

“All the board members took the time to introduce themselves before the board got started,” she said. “They said it was just as difficult sitting in front of the candidates as it was to be one. They really made us all feel a little bit more at ease.”

Crane said that it feels overwhelming to be recognized at the state level and understands that a lot of responsibility is now placed on her to represent the state and to do well at the regional competition.

“Sgt. Crane’s strength was her confidence and knowledge, which I think has been developed by her recent deployment experiences,” said Bekaert. “I know she will do great at the regional competition.”

One of the newest members of the South Dakota Army National Guard, Pfc. Kevin King from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 109th Regional Support Group, Rapid City, was selected as the Soldier of the year. Bekaert said he was impressed that someone who joined the Guard only 11 months ago could do so well.

“Wow, I feel honored to have been picked out of all the South Dakota National Guardsmen,” said King. “I am still wondering if they got the right guy. The whole experience has been very humbling.”

King is a full-time student at Black Hills State University in Spearfish and is pursuing a degree in political science. His short-term goals are to graduate from college and attend the South Dakota Army National Guard Officer Candidate School and receive a commission as an officer.

What impressed Bekaert the most was his positive attitude and confidence.

“This young man is amazing,” he said. “His long-term goal is to be the governor of South Dakota and by the way he presents himself I think he will do just that.”

Sgt. Crane and Pfc. King will now go on to the 2008 Northwest Regional Competition, where they will compete against selected Soldiers from seven different states within the surrounding region. National Guard commands from Alaska, Montana, Washington, North Dakota, Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming will send their best to the regional competition scheduled for May 16-21 at Fort Harrison, Montana.

Competitors for the regional competition will have to be prepared to demonstrate their proficiency in 27 separate military tasks. Tasks range from military counseling and supply economy to day and night land navigation. Competitors will also be required to take the Army Physical Fitness Test, perform first-aid, qualify on the M16A2 rifle, and write an essay on a military topic provided on the first day of the competition.

“Most Soldiers do not understand how demanding this five-day competition can be,” said Bekaert. “They still have a lot of hard work ahead of them.”

Winners of this next event will move on to the U.S. Army Forces Command NCO and Soldier of the Year Competition scheduled in August at Fort Benning, Ga.

The Soldiers who competed in the state board held on Jan. 26 at the Regional Training Institute in Sioux Falls are listed below along with the major South Dakota Army National Guard command they represented.

Spc. Terry Bernt, 196th Combat Support Brigade (Maneuver Enhancement), Sioux Falls

Sgt. Shannon Crane, Joint Force Headquarters, Rapid City

Pfc. Kevin King, 109th Regional Support Group, Rapid City

Staff Sgt. Kelly Leis, 109th Regional Support Group, Rapid City

Sgt. Ryan Vanholland, 196th Combat Support Brigade (Maneuver Enhancement), Sioux Falls

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Photos:

SDARNG NCO of the Year – Sgt. Shannon Crane

Link to Photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/SGT_SHANNON_CRANE.jpg

SDARNG Soldier of the Year – Pfc. Kevin King

Link to Photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/PFC_KEVIN_KING.jpg

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact Maj. Orson Ward at (605) 737-6721 or cell (605) 431-8753.